Baptists, General Assembly &c

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THE

LETTER

OF THE

COMMITTEE,

APPOINTED BY THE

GENERAL BAPTIST ASSEMBLY,

HELD IN LONDON, JUNE 2, 1773,

To be circulated amongſt the CHURCHES.

BRITISH MUSEUM

THE LETTER.

BELOVED BRETHREN,

BEING appointed by the GENERAL ASSEMBLY, as a COMMITTEE, to enquire into the Cauſes of the Decay of chriſtian Piety and their Remedies, and requeſted to draw up a Letter to be circulated amongſt the Churches; WE, in Compliance with ſuch Appointment and Requeſt, ſend to you our Sentiments, in brief, to point out the Cauſes and Remedies required; wiſhing Proſperity to all the Churches, and that Grace and Peace may be multiplied amongſt them.

It hath been a Complaint, in all Ages, that pure and undefiled Religion hath not flouriſhed proportionate to the Advan-

tages of Knowledge and Opportunities for Improvement; the Prophet of old made this Complaint, "what could have "been done more to my Vineyard, that I "have not done in it? Wherefore, when "I looked that it ſhould bring forth "Grapes, brought it forth wild Grapes?*" and ever ſince Life and Immortality have been brought to Light by the Goſpel of Jeſus Chriſt, and confirmed by his Reſurrection from the Dead, the Miniſters of the Goſpel have had Reaſon to complain, and cry out "who hath believed our Report?†" As the Complaint therefore hath been ſo general, it appears that there are ſome Cauſes of Decay that are not peculiar to any Age or to any Denomination of Chriſtians; but that "the whole Head is ſick and the "whole Heart is faint.‡"

It is an old and true Obſervation, in common Life; "that Mankind are "loſt for Want of thinking," and ſurely every Chriſtian will readily allow that Thoughtleſſneſs is as fatal an Hinderance

* Iſa. v. 4. † Iſa. liii. 1. ‡ Iſa. i. 5.

to

to our Growth and Improvement in Religion, as to our Succeſs in the common Affairs of Life. That Religion cannot be ſupported without ſerious Thought and Reflection is evident, Thought and Reflection being, in fact, the very Baſis of all true Religion; as is well illuſtrated in that Expreſſion concerning the Prodigal Son, " and when he came to himſelf * " implying, when he came to Thought and Reflection, without which the Senſes and Paſſions debaſe and enſlave the Man; and inſtead of an affecting Senſe of the Being and Preſence of God and our perpetual Obligations to him, thoughtleſs Perſons, though they enjoy Mercies, ſee not a God through them, nor are they gratefully affected with them; " God is not in all their " Thoughts. † "

On Minds thus diſpoſed the Honours, Riches, Pleaſures, Cuſtoms and Follies of the World, have a ſurpriſing Influence to weaken a religious Apprehenſion and view of Things; and much of the Decay

* Luke, xv. 17. † Pſalm, x. 4.

of chriſtian Piety muſt be attributed to carnal and worldly Attachments; and here we cannot help obſerving, that not a little of the preſent Evil ariſes from the increaſing Profligacy and Diſſipation of the GREAT, the Influence of whoſe Example, together with a Fear of being deemed ſingular in a corrupt Age, hath ſadly affected the Minds and the Conduct of too many of the Profeſſors of Religion, and made manifeſt the Truth of our Lord's Declaration, "that no Man can ſerve two "Maſters, ye cannot ſerve God and "Mammon.*"

Now where the Love of the World prevails, the Love of the Father is ſcarcely to be found; and conſequently, a Regard to, and Zeal for the Goſpel, which proceedeth from God, dies, and the Doctrines and Duties therein contained looſe their Weight and Importance—Men become leſs affected with their own Sinfullneſs, and leſs ſolicitous for Pardon—They ſee little or no Need of a Saviour, nor

* Matthew, vi. 24.

ſuitableneſs

ſuitableneſs in his Offices and Characters —They view no Excellency in the Diſcovery of Immortality and eternal Life, nor Beauty in the Method propoſed of attaining it, and looſe all Senſe of the Goodneſs, Grace, Promiſes, and Aſſiſtance preſented and offered in that divine Œconomy of Salvation.

Profeſſors being thus deceived and led away, religious Worſhip becomes inſipid, ſpiritual Converſe is neglected, and the Comunion and Diſcipline of the Church little regarded; for, where there is no Zeal for the Goſpel, how can it be expected that Perſons will be diligent in hearing it, or eager to converſe about it. Profeſſors, in Fact, deal now more with the World than with Heaven, and their Conduct ſpeaks the Language of Iſrael, as mentioned by the Prophet, "when will the "Sabbath be gone, *" that we may go to our Merchandize: Inſtead of longing for the Day when they may go to the Houſe of the Lord and enquire in his

* Amos, viii. 5.

Temple, they are loſt to the Beauty and Glory of God as ſeen in the Sanctuary; and thus, through the Indifference and Negligence of Individuals, the whole Body is gradually affected, the Hands of ſuch as remain weakned, and Church Order and Diſcipline diſſolved: and it's much to be queſtioned whether the growing Decays amongſt our general Baptiſt Churches are not more particularly owing to the Defects here mentioned; for, though the preſent Age have thought our Forefathers too ſcrupulous and rigid in ſome Particulars, yet the Refinement and Moderation of our Day hath had no good Effect, but, on the contrary, the genuine Spirit of Chriſtian Love and Zeal, which can only be ſupported by friendly Converſe, chriſtian Communion and church Diſcipline preſerved according to Goſpel order, is almoſt extinct.

As the Profeſſion and Power of Religion is greatly hurt by public Neglects; a Diſregard to family Worſhip and the Inſtruction and Government of Children muſt totally deſtroy every remaining Principle

ciple of Piety. Solomon obſerves " train " up a Child in the Way he ſhould go; " and when he is old he will not depart " from it. * " But! What can be expected in the riſing Generation? When neither Precept nor Precedent is ſet before them of that which is good and truly commendable; but, on the contrary, they are brought up in Ignorance of the beſt Things, encouraged in the Gaeties of the World, and little Concern manifeſted for their religious Connection and prudent Settlement in Life; for we muſt obſerve to you, that where Profeſſors have been united to irreligious Perſons, ſuch Connection hath been a Canker to family Religion; and, even where there hath been only a Diſagreement in religious Principles, their Zeal not being united, it hath tended to make ſuch Perſons indifferent to the Worſhip, Government, and Inſtruction of their Families, which Indifference grows up with Poſterity and the State of the Chriſtian World may be expected,

* Proverbs, xxii. 6.

under

under ſuch Circumſtances, to grow worſe and worſe, till, though the Name of Religion be juſt kept alive, the very Vitals and Eſſence of Chriſtianity are entirely loſt.

Such we apprehend are the general Cauſes of the Decay of Piety amongſt us. It may be aſked, is the whole Body chargeable? We anſwer, none can ſay he hath kept his Heart pure and upright before God, but all (*Miniſters, as well as People*) muſt confeſs they have come ſhort of the Glory of God. But, ſhould it be aſked, what are the Remedies and whence the Recovery? We anſwer, the Remedy can only be obtained from ſerious Thought and Reflection, from God and his Word. We, therefore call you, Brethren, in the Name of God, to conſider what you are, and what made for—what Obligations you are under to God, and how deficient in your Regards to him; and let the devout Sentiments of the pious Pſalmiſt, * be the Subject of your ſerious Reading and At-

* Pſalm, cxxxix.

tention,

tention, with Prayer to God, till you feel a Spirit correſponding therewith in your own Souls. This, will have a ſtrong Tendency to divert the Paſſions and Senſes from mean and low Purſuits, and make them as Wings to the Soul in aſpiring after God, will engage us to look above the Honours, Riches, &c. of this World, and animate us with more Zeal for the Word of God, in its important Doctrines and Duties. Beſides, we are perſuaded that ſerious Thought cheriſhed ſhall not be in vain; for as the Prophet declares "then ſhall we know, if we follow on to "know the Lord.*" So the Conduct of the Father of the Prodigal, in the Parable before cited, points out by Similitude the Conduct of God towards thoſe in whom Reflection takes Place.

And we intreat you, particularly, from a Conviction of the Truth of divine Writ, to make the Word of God your Study and Delight, not meerly as Diſputants but as Chriſtians to apply theſe Truths to

* Hoſea, vi. 3.

your

your Minds, *viz.* the Degeneracy of Mankind by Sin.—Their State and Condition without Pardon—the Neceſſity of Regeneration—the ſuitableneſs of the Goſpel Proviſion in the promiſed Aſſiſtance of the Holy Spirit—The peculiar amiableneſs of Chriſt and Excellencies of his Character and Offices, and the abundant Love, Grace, and Goodneſs of God that ſhines forth in the Chriſtian Scheme of Salvation; that, ſeeing our own ſinfulneſs and Chriſt's ſuitableneſs, we may be conſtrained to believe in him, and, walking after his Steps, may keep ourſelves unſpotted from the World.

To promote and encourage ſuch a Conduct we preſs you to a more diligent Attendance on religious Worſhip, a more frequent Remembrance of your Lord in Communion at his Table, and a more friendly Chriſtian Converſe with one another; for the Obſervation of Solomon is juſt, "as Iron ſharpeneth Iron, ſo doth "the Countenance of a Man his Friend.*"

* Proverbs, xxvii. 17.

And

And nothing can have a greater Tendency to inſpirit Thought and keep Devotion alive, than the aſſembling of ourſelves together in the Worſhip of God—exerciſing the ſame devout Thoughts—jointly addreſſing the ſame God—looking for the ſame Supplies—and offering united and ardent Praiſes, and thus ſtrengthning one anothers Hands in the Work and Service of Chriſt. We likewiſe recommend it to the Elders, Deacons, and other Members of our ſeparate Churches to make ſeaſonable Enquiries after, and to be free in converſing about, the State of Religion in each other's Souls, and not ſo much to live as eſtranged one to another; and we truſt the Elders of the Churches will not withold their Admonitions, nor Reproofs when neceſſary, but labour to recover the true Diſcipline of the Church; this would not only be a Check to the unſteady, but, by ſuch Enquiries, &c. their Affection would be mutually warmed, Chriſtian Love improved, and Religion kept alive at Heart.

To render every other Means ſucceſsfull, we beſeech you to make your Habitations Houſes of Prayer; for whatever Profeſſion of Religion may be kept up in public, if it is not ſupported in your Families and in private, it cannot hold long; for your Decays, which are already manifeſt to the World, had their firſt Riſe from a Neglect of thoſe Duties, and can only be remedied by your Return to them in Connection with other Duties: Family Worſhip, Government, and Inſtruction are of vaſt Importance for the Support of Religion. Children or Servants will be ſenſibly hurt, or improved, by the Neglect or Practice of them; and we are perſuaded, did Maſters of Families ſet a better Precedent before them, exerting themſelves for their Inſtruction, and practiſing and recommending private Prayer, glorious Effects would be produced in themſelves and their Poſterity; they would be guarded againſt the Evils of Life, being animated with this Reſolution, that "as for them and their "Houſe, they would ſerve the Lord.*"

* Joſhua, xxiv. 15.

Having

Having thus endeavoured to repreſent to you the Cauſes of the Decay of Chriſtian Piety and their Remedies, we rejoice in the Hope that the Elders of the ſeparate Churches, will add Strength to this Epiſtle by their ſeveral Admonitions, and, with their Congregations, be very earneſt in their Supplications to God, for the gracious Influences of his Spirit and the Revival of Religion amongſt us, which is the fervent Prayer of,

BELOVED BRETHREN,

Your Servants in the LORD,

The COMMITTEE,

GILBERT BOYCE,
DANIEL DOBEL,
DANIEL NOBLE,
JOSEPH BROWN.

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